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Teacher Education for the Middle Years of Schooling: Sustaining Quality Middle Level Preparation in Australian Universities.

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Abstract: The middle years of schooling (Years 5-9) has emerged as a significant field of educational research in the last two decades but investigation of specialised approaches to middle level teacher education has received little attention. The rationale for specialised programs or units is that middle level teachers require specific preparation to be able to meet the educational needs of young adolescents (10-15 years old). This article draws from a doctoral study in which three outstanding teacher educators, with responsibility for middle level teacher education in their Australian universities, were interviewed about their programs (Shanks, 2010). The article identifies and discusses a number of factors that threaten the viability of quality middle level teacher preparation.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, reform of the middle years of schooling (Years 5-9) in Australia has progressed to the point that it is regarded as a significant issue in the national education discourse (Bahr & Crosswell, 2011). The phenomenon of reform in the middle years is a response to concerns held by a diverse range of educational stakeholders that traditional approaches to upper primary and lower secondary schooling frequently fail to meet young adolescents' (10-15 years old) developmental and educational needs (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007; Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Middle Years of Schooling Association [MYSA], 2008; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Revealingly, post-compulsory schooling retention rates in Australia, which hover in the 75-85% range, are poor compared with other developed countries and, over the past two decades, have been slow to improve (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003). Leaving or dropping out of school early, without formal qualifications, has long been known to result in serious and long-term repercussions for young people that are economic, social and personal, and, ultimately, have a negative impact on society (Rumberger, 1987; Ramsdal, Gjaerum, & Wynn, 2013).

Reforms in the middle years in the Australian states and territories have resulted in the development of research, policies and initiatives designed to address high levels of alienation and disengagement experienced by young adolescents in traditional schooling contexts (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2012; Barratt, 1998; Carrington, 2006; Luke et al., 2003; MYSA, 2008; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010). A logical outcome has been the growth – especially in the independent sector – of stand-alone middle schools or middle school campuses housed within

larger school organisations as a school type that is focused on addressing the developmental needs of young adolescents and improving educational outcomes (de Jong & Chadbourne, 2007). These developments have resulted in increased demand for specialised middle level teacher education. As a result, several Australian universities have expanded their teacher education programs to include offerings that specifically prepare pre-service teachers to educate young adolescents.

Middle Level Teacher Education in Australia

Advocates for specialised programs or units of middle level teacher education argue that teachers who complete a generic program of primary or secondary teacher education typically lack the specific set of professional skills required to meet the educational needs of young adolescents. The NMSA's position statement on the *Professional Preparation of Middle Level Teachers* (2006) states that "successful middle level teachers, at [the] most fundamental level, must be experts in the development and needs of young adolescents". This statement provides a clear and succinct rationale for establishing specialised programs or units for middle level teacher education. Indeed, there is broad agreement in the literature – in Australia and elsewhere – that providing specialised teacher education for the middle years is pivotal to improving educational outcomes in early adolescence (Aspland & Crosswell, 2002; Bahr & Crosswell, 2011; Beane & Brodhagen, 2001; Bishop, 2008; Chadbourne, 2002; de Jong & Chadbourne, 2005; Dowden, Bishop, & Nolan, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2003; NMSA, 2006; Nolan, Kane, & Lind, 2003; Pendergast, Keogh, Garrick, & Reynolds, 2009; Pendergast, Whitehead, de Jong, Newhouse-Maiden & Bahr, 2007; Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2010, 2013).

By 2009, more than 20 dedicated programs of middle level teacher preparation had been established in Australian universities (Pendergast & Bahr, 2010). The nature of these programs has varied, with some universities implementing suites of specialised undergraduate and graduate-entry programs, others adding a middle years pathway within existing programs, and still others offering elective units on the middle years of schooling (Bahr & Crosswell, 2011). Universities in metropolitan contexts in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia have been especially responsive to the growth of middle years of schooling in their regions by establishing dedicated stand-alone middle level teacher education programs. The aim of these programs and units is to develop specialist middle level teachers who have the necessary dispositions, knowledge, skills and values for teaching young adolescents in Australian schools. Although programs and units differ slightly according to philosophical orientation, geographical context and the nature of their qualifications, they are committed to the principles of middle level education and, specifically, to improving educational outcomes for young adolescents in Australian schools. The design of programs and units is strongly influenced by the essential elements of effective middle level teacher education as espoused by the NMSA (2006) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These seminal American publications articulate the essential elements of effective middle level teacher education programs as comprising: a comprehensive understanding of early adolescence and the needs of young adolescents, a study of the philosophy and organisation of middle level education, in-depth study of middle level curriculum, planning, teaching and assessment, concentrated study in two broad teaching fields, and middle level field experiences. Embedded within these essential components are principles

and practices that promote authentic, constructivist, student-centred and developmentally appropriate pedagogy for young adolescent students (Beane & Lipka, 2006; Pendergast et al., 2007). In adhering to these principles, programs and units are characterised by their adolescent-centredness and their focus on the development of knowledge and the implementation of innovative and progressive philosophical and pedagogical approaches that are broadly responsive to the socio-emotional, physical, cognitive and wider socio-cultural needs of young adolescent students. The aim of these programs and units is to develop highly effective teachers who have a distinct middle level identity and who understand the differentiated needs and abilities of young adolescents (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001; Rumble & Aspland, 2010).

Recent research indicates that the lack of specialised knowledge about the middle years of schooling among some educational professionals is slowing the reform agenda. In the USA context, McEwin and Greene (2011) described the on-going practice in some American states of employing teachers who lack specific preparation for teaching young adolescents as “a major roadblock” to the success of the middle years of schooling (p. 55). In the New Zealand (NZ) context, Shanks and Dowden (2013) found that, despite the presence of a differentiated ‘Learning Pathway’ for young adolescents clearly articulated within the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), many teacher educators in NZ universities lack specific knowledge and awareness about the developmental and educational needs of young adolescents, and instead believe generic knowledge of “effective teaching approaches” is sufficient to meet the needs of students at any stage of their schooling (p. 106). Similarly, Dowden (2012) found that the pedagogical philosophies of teachers at two middle school campuses housed within two independent schools in Tasmania were not informed by specific knowledge about the developmental and educational needs of young adolescents.

In addition, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has set challenging accreditation requirements for initial teacher education programs specifically preparing teachers for the middle years by stating that such programs “must fully address the requirements for primary teaching and for secondary teaching in at least one major study or two minor studies in secondary teaching areas” (2011, p. 15). Nonetheless, both primary and secondary programs should include robust units on the middle years of schooling in order to properly prepare teachers to meet the learning needs of young adolescents (AITSL, 2014; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2013).

Despite the relatively low public profile of the middle years of schooling compared to other sectors such as early childhood education, middle level teacher preparation has forged a legitimate identity and place within Australian teacher education. A literature on the efficacy of Australian middle level teacher preparation is emerging (Hudson, 2009; Hudson, Beutel, Bradfield, & Hudson, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2003; Pendergast, Keogh, Garrick, & Reynolds, 2009) but at present there is a paucity of literature on the sustainability of programs or units.

This article draws on Australian data from a recent doctoral study that explored the provision of teacher education in the middle years (Shanks, 2010). This doctoral study investigated the underlying philosophy, design, structure and implementation in stand-alone middle level teacher education programs in three Australian universities. While there were contextual differences across these three settings, each program espoused and modelled principles and practices that promote constructivist, student-centred and developmentally appropriate pedagogies that are responsive to young adolescents. This article discusses significant systemic, school and institutional factors that influence the sustainability and viability of middle level teacher education programs. It examines the origins and nature of these

influences and their impact on the functionality and sustainability of programs and units for preparing teachers for the middle years. The article concludes that in order to successfully implement and maintain effective middle level teacher education, it is necessary to design a model that is sympathetic to the wider ecology of middle level schooling in the region and thus attracts the support of community stakeholders.

Method

The three participants in this study were leading teacher educators in specialised middle level programs of teacher education in three Australian universities. Each participant was a well-known proponent of the middle years of schooling, with an international research profile and a key leadership role in their respective university. The method used was multiple case study (Creswell, 2009), since this design enables rich and detailed information to be obtained from multiple participants across a range of settings. Principles of qualitative research guided decisions made in the selection and recruitment of participants, collection and analysis of data, and the formulation and reporting of findings. The study had human ethics approval and was classified as minimal risk.

In-depth interviews were used for the collection of data. The focus for the interviews was to explore participants' beliefs about the provision for the middle years of schooling within the conceptual framework, the philosophical foundations, and the design and content of their teacher education programs. In addition, the participants were invited to identify any problems or barriers experienced during the implementation of their programs. A semi-structured interviewing format was utilised so that prepared open-ended questions could be asked systematically, while also allowing for further probe questions arising from participants' responses (Creswell, 2009; Flick, von Kardorffe, & Steinke, 2004). The interviews were conducted via audio-conferencing technology. Each interview was approximately 90 minutes long and was recorded for later transcription.

Interpretive analysis was used to create meaning from the interview data (Creswell, 2009). The data were organised into conceptual categories and themes representing patterns of meaning were derived inductively. To enhance the reliability of the findings, two independent observers were engaged to cross-check the transcripts to identify categories and develop themes derived from the data. In addition, the data were triangulated by comparing it with similar data from three middle years' experts in the USA and one in New Zealand. The findings of qualitative research are often best represented as a rich narrative (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), thus the voices of the participants are captured and communicated in the results via relevant excerpts from the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Results

Two broad themes emerged from the data analysis. These were, firstly, the characteristics of effective middle level teacher education programs and units and, secondly, the challenges to implementing and sustaining such programs.

Characteristics of Effective Middle Level Teacher Education Programs

All three programs had commonalities relating to design, structure and implementation. These were: (a) commitment to principles of middle level education, (b) use of research to inform programs, (c) focus on subject content and pedagogical knowledge, (d) congruent teaching approaches in the organisation and delivery of programs, (e) situating school practicum in middle level settings, and (f) rigorous review and evaluation.

Commitment to Middle Level Education

The participants demonstrated a deep commitment to the philosophy of middle level education and providing teacher education programs that are informed by teaching staff who are actively involved in research on the middle years of schooling. One participant explained:

Many of our teaching team are also in a research team ... [they're] an active, informed group who are also connected to the teaching profession. They're not an isolated group of academics.

The participants believed that it is the specific focus on early adolescent learners and the associated contextualisation of effective teaching dimensions that distinguishes middle level teacher preparation from other kinds of teacher education.

Programs Informed by Research Literature

All three programs were influenced by seminal middle years' literature on effective middle level teacher education programs, such as NMSA's and *Turning Points'* respective statements (NMSA, 2006; Jackson & Davis, 2000). The essential elements from the literature are: comprehensive understanding of the developmental stage of early adolescence; study of the philosophy and organisation of middle level education; in-depth study of middle level curriculum, planning, teaching and assessment; concentrated study of two broad subject areas; and middle level practicum experiences. Embedded within these elements are principles and practices that promote authentic, constructivist, student-centred and developmentally appropriate pedagogies for young adolescents. The work of Beane (1997) on student-centred approaches to curriculum integration was used extensively in all three programs. While much of the literature utilised in the programs was from the USA, the participants emphasised the importance of using contemporary Australian research on curriculum integration where possible (e.g. Dowden, 2007, 2014; Dowden & Nolan, 2007; Pendergast, Nicholls, & Honan, 2012). One participant explained:

We're aware that we don't want to prepare our [pre-service teachers] using other literature where we ... keep saying ... our system actually doesn't work like that.

Focus on Developing Subject Area and Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The participants described a focus, present in all three programs, on developing both the depth of subject area knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge for teaching young adolescents. This is predicated on the notion that the primary purpose of middle level education is to promote the intellectual development of young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Nolan, Kane, & Lind, 2003). The one-year graduate diploma program at one university (comprising eight units and two practicums) includes three units on developing pre-service teachers' subject knowledge in literacy, numeracy and science for the middle years, with a further unit devoted to curricular and pedagogical approaches that respond to young adolescents' developmental needs. The Bachelor of Education (Middle Years) program at another university emphasises the importance of pre-service teachers developing in-depth subject area knowledge in two Key Learning Areas as well as pertinent pedagogical content knowledge. This is combined with units that are multidisciplinary and utilise responsive pedagogical practices. At a third university, pre-service teachers can undertake a four-year double-degree program incorporating a Bachelor of Education and one other degree with one major and one minor in relevant subject areas. These are combined with a range of curriculum and pedagogy units for the middle years. In summary, the programs in these universities focused on the development of subject area and pedagogical content knowledge in the core areas of literacy, numeracy and science.

Congruent Teaching Approaches

The participants emphasised the importance of modelling effective middle years of schooling practice. Each participant specifically identified the concept of 'congruent teaching' as a key component in the pedagogical framework of their respective programs (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). In this approach, teacher educators verbally articulate and model appropriate classroom practice (Paris, Polson-Genge, & Shanks, 2010). Typical examples of such practice were reflection on practice, integration of critical thinking, effective teacher-student relationships, learning collaboratively, and integrating ICT into learning contexts. One participant elaborated:

We think role modelling in the program is absolutely critical. We model it and we've undergone [professional development] ... We think there's a problem with getting a specialist in because then you're modelling the need for a specialist [but] we think it should be part of everyone's practice.

Situating Teaching Practicum in Middle Level Settings

The participants believed that pre-service teachers specialising in the middle years should be placed in middle level settings during teaching practicum, despite many different school types in primary and secondary systems in the Australian states and territories. The variable quality of teaching that pre-service teachers encountered in middle level settings was a concern to all participants. One explained:

Not many [pre-service teachers] are going to walk into a middle school where the philosophy of [the middle years of schooling] is actually being practised. It's on the sign at the front door but that's where it stops.

Accordingly, the participants emphasised the importance of producing graduates who are able to critique ineffective pedagogical practices or ideological positions and, in the process, clearly articulate their own position as a specialist middle level teacher. One participant recommended developing collaborative relationships with specific schools so that a 'critical mass' of effective middle level placements and mentor teachers could be established. She explained that such collaborations could include practising teachers with middle level expertise teaching directly into university programs and teacher educators providing professional learning opportunities for schools.

Rigorous Review and Evaluation of Programs

All three participants believed that the middle years of schooling was in danger of falling off the mainstream education agenda and that national reform of middle level schooling was losing momentum (Bahr & Crosswell, 2011). They each emphasised the imperative for thorough appraisal and critical review by a range of stakeholders to maintain the credibility of their respective programs. One participant commented:

We actually went the extra mile ... we tried our very best to ensure that what we were doing was of a high quality and, if it wasn't, we changed it.

Another participant explained:

Most years we've had a focus group of [pre-service teachers] who respond ... to questions about the program ... We've also had an external reference group [that] scrutinises our documentation to ensure the program delivers what is needed.

Challenges to Sustaining Middle Level Teacher Education Programs and Units

The second theme identified a range of challenges that threatened the sustainability and long-term viability of specialised middle level teacher education. These challenges came from schools and school systems as well as from the actual universities that offered middle level teacher education.

Challenges in School Systems

A key factor influencing the success or failure of specialised programs was the level of support within the relevant school sector. In some cases, middle level teacher education was situated in states with limited supporting infrastructure. The participants highlighted difficulties obtaining quality school placements or effective mentor teachers for teaching practicums. One explained:

We push the agenda [that pre-service teachers] have to be advocates ... [they are unlikely] to walk into an environment already embracing the needs of young adolescents.

The participants also stressed the importance of developing pre-service teachers' ability to critically reflect in order to make sense of mismatches between the key principles of middle level schooling espoused in teacher education programs and the realities they can face in schools. One participant outlined a strategy used in her program:

We actually provide some audit tools ... [pre-service teachers] can use when they go [on practicum] ... They can contextualise accordingly. For example: would I use this? Does it reflect middle level practices? What else can I learn?

Challenges from within Universities

In recent years, Australian universities have been targeted by political initiatives aimed at rationalising public funding. As a result, universities are under constant pressure to review their programs and trim costs. All the participants emphasised that it is important to ensure that middle level teacher education is fully supported by senior management in universities. The constrained financial environment for Australian universities was regarded as a threat to the viability of programs. One participant explained how the unpredictable nature of institutional funding was problematic:

There wasn't the will to put resources into what was an award winning program ... To ensure the program was economically viable, we ... did quite a bit of marketing such as creating a website, brochures, word of mouth ... but it was difficult to keep the momentum going and [enrolments] dropped.

A consequence of reduced resourcing was the dilution of specific middle years of schooling content in some programs. One participant explained:

The focus on the middle years of schooling has now been spread across a number of topics ... There is a specialist curriculum topic on integrated curriculum, however the middle level content is generally quite diffused across topics.

The participants also commented on varying levels of collegial support for middle level programs. One explained:

There was certainly a lot of 'anti' feeling about whether [our] middle years' program should have launched ... Some of the antagonism [was not based on an informed] debate about the pros and cons of [the middle years of schooling].

Discussion

Despite the development of a vigorous middle years of schooling reform movement in Australia, the traditional two-tiered system of schooling – dominated by primary and secondary teacher cultures – is an obstacle to sustaining middle level teacher education that is not easily overcome. Cultures and practices within school systems in the Australian states and territories, teachers' unions, and traditional approaches to teacher education all combine to reify and reinforce powerful social mores within the primary and secondary modes of schooling. Varying degrees of ambivalence to the middle years of schooling, along with insufficient recognition or understanding of the principles of the middle years of schooling, mean that the notion of specialised teaching in the middle years remains contested ground at local, state and national levels. Tough accreditation requirements in recent years mean that few institutions are likely to persist with dedicated middle schooling programs (AITSL, 2011). For these reasons, the argument in favour of specialised middle level teacher education has not yet won universal acceptance.

A further challenge that undermines the sustainability of middle level teacher education programs relates to the employability of graduates. The two-tier system of schooling means that most schools – with the possible exception of rural or remote communities – are identified as primary or secondary based on their respective proportions of primary and secondary teaching staff. This creates difficulties for graduating pre-service teachers because vacancies are usually advertised as primary or secondary positions, rather than as middle level positions. In addition, most advertisements target subject-area experts, whereas few target middle years' experts. Pre-service teachers' perceptions concerning future employability exert a powerful influence on enrolment numbers in specialised programs because, without sufficient enrolments, the viability of programs is threatened.

Although higher education in Australia is currently facing difficult challenges, the provision of high quality middle level teacher education is a prerequisite to creating vibrant and effective learning environments in Years 4-9 classrooms across Australia. This study has identified three factors that are crucial to the success of middle level teacher education: (1) the knowledge base of teacher educators, (2) team teaching, and (3) collaborations between universities and schools.

Knowledge Base of Teacher Educators

This study found that middle level teacher educators must have an in-depth knowledge of the middle years of schooling and be committed to improving educational outcomes for young adolescents. The participants in this study each demonstrated a deep understanding of the philosophy and practices of the middle years of schooling (MYSA, 2008). Each program was rigorous because their conceptual foundations were grounded in contemporary research and pedagogical practices that respond to the diverse needs of young adolescents. Specialised middle level teacher education is still breaking new ground in Australia. This involves generating new and innovative approaches to middle level education through research and initiatives to advance the reform agenda in the states and territories. When teams of middle level teacher educators are highly knowledgeable and committed to the philosophy of middle years of schooling, they are well positioned to be able to resist external pressures. In contrast, when teams of middle level teachers lack specific knowledge and understanding about the middle years of schooling, they

tend to naively assume that knowledge and understandings from primary or secondary teaching cultures will suffice, thus they are poorly placed to advance the middle years' reform agenda.

Team Teaching

This study found that a collaborative team approach to the design and implementation of programs is more effective, and ultimately more sustainable, than relying on the expertise of one or two key individuals. This issue is especially important in the middle years because relatively few classroom practitioners have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the research base on middle schooling. When a group of teacher educators, with a specific interest in the middle years, pools their ideas, energy and collective knowledge to design and implement middle level teacher education, there is a sense of shared purpose and advocacy that positively benefits the whole program. Where a team approach to implementation is adopted, negative effects associated with staff attrition are mitigated because a critical mass of teacher educators with specific knowledge and conceptual understanding of the middle years of schooling remains.

Collaborations between Universities and Schools

This study found that developing collaborative professional relationships between universities and schools is especially beneficial, with the potential for a rich range of synergies. The provision of targeted professional development for school teachers facilitates alignment with university coursework, creating stronger connections between the objectives of middle level programs and school-based initiatives. Teams of teacher educators could deliver professional development on the middle years of schooling and the developmental stage of young adolescence to school teachers as well as other stakeholders in the community such as parents and caregivers. Action research could be conducted in schools and teachers could enrol in postgraduate programs. Exemplary middle level teachers could teach in university programs and develop an academic profile by presenting seminars and engaging in collaborative research. In short, the cross-fertilisation of expertise and innovative ideas between universities and schools could generate fresh and more informed approaches to the teaching of young adolescents. In contrast, this study found that when universities fail to invest energy, expertise and resources into building support within the school sector, programs of middle level teacher education tend to stall because they become increasingly vulnerable to casual critique from primary or secondary schooling stakeholders who are uninformed by relevant middle years' research.

The original concept for the American middle school in the 1960s was "a totally integrated ecology of schooling" (Dickenson & Butler, 2001, p. 8). Similarly, this study indicates that an 'ecological' model of teacher education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that engages stakeholders in the wider community is a promising way to sustain specialised middle level programs. The south-eastern region of Queensland is a case in point. Several academics who are actively engaged in research on the middle years of schooling work in universities based within this region. Many of these academics have built strong links with other educational professionals who are committed to the middle years of schooling. Several independent schools in Queensland have developed separate middle schools that are underpinned by a commitment to the diverse educational needs of young adolescents. Moreover, in 2014, the Queensland state government conducted a massive program of professional development for the Junior Secondary years (Years

7-9) entitled 'Leading Change' that was delivered to secondary school principals and senior teachers throughout the state (Pendergast et al., 2014). Despite concerns that the current political context is less supportive of the middle years of schooling than in the past (e.g. Bahr & Crosswell, 2011), this region remains a fertile ground for nurturing middle level teacher education.

Conclusion

Dedicated middle level teacher education in Australian universities is integral to advancing the middle years of schooling reform agenda and to improving educational outcomes for young adolescents. While quality education is a prerequisite for technological and economic progress, it is also in the best interests of a democratic nation with a developed economy to ensure that the whole populace is well educated. As such, it is imperative that middle level teacher education in Australia is sustained so that teachers in Years 4-9 are properly prepared for the classroom and are capable of meeting the unique needs of each young adolescent learner. At the systemic level, this may be the only practicable way that schooling across the middle years will be able to instil in young people the love of learning and the desire to take personal control of their education and, in so doing, equip them for fulfilling and productive careers.

This article has identified a range of interrelated schooling and university-based influences that threaten the viability and sustainability of middle level teacher education. These factors are inextricably linked, meaning that it is essential for stakeholders in middle level teacher education to be cognisant of wider socio-political and economic influences at national and state levels. In particular, effective middle level teacher education needs: (1) knowledgeable teacher educators with an understanding of the key principles of middle years of schooling and a commitment to working together as a team, (2) strong support at the executive level from universities and other tertiary institutions, and (3) collaborative and productive relationships between teacher educators and key personnel in schools that cater for all or part of Years 4-9.

If the impetus of reform in the middle years of schooling is to be sustained, then recognition of the factors that threaten middle level teacher education in Australia, coupled with appropriate measures to deal with them, is imperative. AITSL's recent 'Statement of Intent' emphasises that initial teacher education needs to be high quality and that teachers in the classroom need to be knowledgeable and competent at every level of schooling (AITSL, 2014) but, unless universities unequivocally commit resources to middle level teacher education, it is inevitable that specialised middle level programs and units will become unsustainable.

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